

Reprinted soon after in The IV. Number

Reprinted soon after in the 18. Number
of Valpy's Pamphleteer.

A.
SKETCH

OF THE

VARIOUS PROPOSALS

FOR A

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

IN THE

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE,

INTRODUCED

INTO THE

PARLIAMENT

OF

GREAT BRITAIN

FROM

1770 to 1812.

by Geo. W. Meadeley.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY T. DAVISON, WHITEFRIARS.

1812.

HOUSE OF LORDS.

Monday, May 14th, 1770.

THE EARL OF CHATHAM, in moving an *Address to the king, to desire he would dissolve the present parliament*, stated, that "instead of depriving a county of its representative," alluding to the case of Mr. Wilkes, "one or more members ought to be added to the representation of the counties, in order to operate as a balance, against the weight of several corrupt and venal boroughs, which perhaps could not be lopped off entirely, without the hazard of a public convulsion*."

* "Purity of parliament," said his Lordship, in his answer to an address of thanks from the city of London for the above declaration, June 1st, 1770, "is the corner stone of the Commonwealth; and as one obvious means towards this necessary end, to strengthen and extend the natural relation between the constitution and the elected, I have publicly expressed my earnest wishes for a more full and equal representation, by the addition of one knight of the shire in the county, as a farther balance to the mercenary boroughs. I have thrown out this idea with the just diffidence of a private man, when he presumes to suggest any thing new in a high matter. Animated by your approbation, I shall continue humbly to submit it to the public wisdom, as an object to be most deliberately weighed, accurately examined, and maturely digested."

And again, in a Letter to Earl Temple, April 17th, 1771, he said, "Allow a speculator in a great chair, to add that a plan for a more equal representation, by additional knights of the shire, seems highly seasonable; and to shorten the duration of parliament not less so*."

* Almon's Anecdotes of the Earl of Chatham, 8vo. II. p. 84. and Addresses from the Court of Common Council to the King, 1760-70. 167-8.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Thursday, March 21st, 1776.

ALDERMAN WILKES moved, "that leave be given to bring in a bill, for a just and equal representation of the people of England in parliament;" which being seconded by Alderman Bull, was opposed by Lord North, and lost without a division*.

* "My idea," said Mr. Wilkes, "in this case, as to the wretched and dépopulated towns and boroughs in general, I freely own, is amputation. I say with Horace, *Inutiles ramos amputans, feliciores inserit*.—I will at this time, Sir, only throw out general ideas, that every free agent in this kingdom should in my wish be represented in parliament; that the metropolis which contains in itself a ninth part of the people, and the counties of Middlesex, York, and others, which so greatly abound with inhabitants, should receive an increase in their representation; that the mean and insignificant boroughs, so emphatically stiled the rotten part of our constitution, should be lopped off, and the electors in them thrown into the counties; and the rich, populous, trading towns, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, and others, be permitted to send deputies to the great council of the nation *."

* Wilkes's Speeches 1786. 8vo. p. 54-71.—Parliamentary Register, 1776. III. 432-442.

HOUSE OF LORDS.

Friday, June 2d, 1780.

THE DUKE OF RICHMOND was introducing his bill to restore annual parliaments, to procure a more equal representation, and to regulate the election of Scotch peers, when he was prevented from proceeding by the alarming riots in Palace-yard *.

* By his Grace's bill it was intended to enact and declare, "That every commoner of this realm, excepting infants, persons of insane mind, and criminals incapacitated by law, hath a natural, unalienable, and equal right, to vote in the election of his representative in parliament. That the election of members to serve in the House of Commons ought to be annual. That the manner of electing the Commons in parliament, and all matters and things respecting the same, be new-modelled according to the present state of the kingdom, and the ancient unalienable rights of the people. That the number of members in the House of Commons being 558, the total number of electors should be divided by that, to give the average number of those, having a right to elect one member."

"My sentiments on the subject of parliamentary reform," said his Grace, in a Letter to the High Sheriff of Sussex, Jan. 17, 1783, "are formed on the experience of twenty-six years, which, whether in or out of government, has equally convinced me, that the restoration of a genuine House of Commons, by a renovation of the rights of the people, is the only remedy against that system of corruption, which has brought the nation to disgrace and poverty, and threatens it with the loss of liberty *."

* Parl. Reg. 1780. XV. 359-366.—Authentic Copy of the Duke of Richmond's Bill.—Letter to William Frankland, Esq.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Tuesday, May 7th, 1782.

THE HON. WILLIAM PITT moved, "that a committee be appointed to enquire into the state of the representation in parliament, and to report to the House their observations thereon." He was seconded by Alderman Sawbridge; but Sir Horace Mann moving the order of the day, it was carried by a majority of twenty—

Ayes 161—Noes 141.

and the original motion lost*.

* Mr. Pitt said, "he would not in the present instance, call to their view or endeavour to discuss the question, whether this species of reform or that; whether this suggestion or that was the best; and which would most completely tally and square with the original frame of the constitution;—it was simply his purpose to move for the institution of an inquiry, composed of such men as the House should, in their wisdom, select as the most proper and best qualified for investigating this subject, and making a report to the House of the best means of carrying into execution a moderate and substantial reform in the representation of the people*."

* Parl. Reg. 1782, VII. 120-141.—Wyvill's Political Papers, I. 442—480.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Wednesday, May 7, 1783.

THE HON. WILLIAM PITT moved, "That the most effectual and practicable measures ought to be taken for the better preventing both bribery and expense in the election of members to serve in parliament.

2. "That whenever it shall be proved before a select committee of the House of Commons, duly appointed to try and determine the merits of any election or return for any place in the kingdom, that the majority of the electors had been guilty of corrupt practices in such election, it will be proper in all such cases, that such place shall from thenceforth be disabled from sending representatives to parliament; and that such electors as shall not (by due course of law), be convicted of any such corrupt practices, shall be enabled to vote at the election of the knights of the shire in which such place shall be situated.

3. "That in order to give further security to the independence of parliament, and to strengthen the community of interest between the people and their representatives, which is essential to the preservation of our excellent constitution on its true principles, it is proper that an addition should be made to that part of the representation which consists of members chosen by the counties and the metropolis*." Mr. Henry Duncombe seconded the motion, but the *order of the day* being moved by Mr. Powys, was carried,

Ayes 293, Noes 149, Majority 144.

* Mr. Pitt gave notice to the House that if the above resolutions were carried, he should then move for leave to bring in a bill to

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Wednesday, June 16th, 1784.

ALDERMAN SAWBRIDGE moved, "That a committee be appointed to enquire into the present state of the representation of the Commons of Great Britain in parliament*." He was seconded by Alderman Newnham; but Lord Mulgrave moving the previous question, it was carried,

Ayes 199, Noes 125, Majority 74.

* Mr. Sawbridge went at large into the state of the representation in various parts of the country, and asked "whether such a system as that which at present prevailed could be called a fair, an equitable, or a satisfactory one? His object would consequently be to have all the light which could be thrown upon the subject, collected under the inspection and cognizance of the House, that they might see whether any thing farther ought to be done or not, and then what the specific remedy ought to be. His motion bound the House to no species of reform, but merely put the matter in progress, and would serve to convince the people of their sincerity, on a subject where so much expectation had been raised." A similar motion of the Alderman's, on the 12th of March preceding, had been rejected by the former parliament, 141, against 93*.

* Parl. Reg. XV. 186-213. XIII. 295.

provide for the disabling of such places from sending members to parliament, in which the majority of electors shall have been proved guilty of corrupt practices; and a bill for the better securing the independence of parliament†.

† Parl. Reg. 1783. IX. 688-736.—Wyvill's Pol. Pap. 253-5. 636-675.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Monday, April 18th, 1785.

THE RIGHT HON. WILLIAM PITT moved, "That leave be given to bring in a bill to amend the representation of the people of England in parliament*," which being seconded by Mr. Henry Duncombe, the House divided,

Ayes 174, Noes 248.—Majority 74.

* "His plan," Mr. Pitt observed, "consisted of two parts: the first was more immediate than the other, but they were both gradual. The first was calculated to produce an early, if not an immediate, change in the constitution of the boroughs; and the second was intended to establish a rule by which the representation should change with the changes of the country. It was, therefore, his intention to provide in the first instance, that the representation of thirty-six of the most decayed boroughs, which should be disfranchised on their voluntary application to parliament for an adequate consideration, should be distributed among the counties, and that afterwards any which might still remain of a similar description, should have the power of surrendering their franchise, and the right of sending members be transferred to such large and populous towns as should desire it*."

* Parl. Reg. 1785. XVIII. 42-83.—Wyvill's Pol. Pap. 372—442.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

° *Thursday, March 4th, 1790.*

THE RIGHT HON. HENRY FLOOD moved, "For leave to bring in a bill to amend the representation of the people in parliament," and was seconded by Mr. Grigby; but Mr. Pitt threatening to move an adjournment, the motion was withdrawn*.

* "My proposition," said Mr. Flood, "is that one hundred members should be added, and that they should be elected by a numerous and responsible body of electors; the resident householders in every county:—resident, because such persons must be best acquainted with every local circumstance, and can attend at the place of election with the least inconvenience or expense to themselves or the candidate; and householders, because, being masters or fathers of families, they must be sufficiently responsible to be entitled to franchise. They are the natural guardians of popular liberty in its first stages,—without them it cannot be retained*.

* Parl. Reg. 1790. XXVII. 196-218.—Wyvill's Pol. Pap. II. 536-563.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Monday, April 30th, 1792.

MR. GREY gave notice of his intention of moving, in the next session of parliament, for a reform in the representation of the people; when Mr. Pitt declared his decided hostility to the measure, and was supported in it by several members, who were usually hostile to his administration*.

* At a general meeting of the FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE, associated for the purpose of obtaining a parliamentary reform, April 26th, after approving of and adopting unanimously, an address to the people of Great Britain, on the objects of their association, it was resolved,

“That a motion be made in the House of Commons, at an early period in the next session of parliament, for introducing a parliamentary reform.

“That Charles Grey, Esq. be requested to make, and the Hon. Thomas Erskine to second the above motion.

Signed by the unanimous order of the meeting,

W. H. LAMBTON, Chairman*.”

* Parl. Reg. 1792. XXXII. 449-498.—Proceedings of the Friends of the People, 19, 20.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Monday, May 6th, 1793.

MR. GREY presented a petition from certain persons, members of the SOCIETY OF FRIENDS OF THE PEOPLE, stating with great propriety and distinctness the defects which at present exist in the representation of the people in parliament, which they declared themselves ready to prove at the bar; urging the necessity and importance of applying an immediate remedy; and praying the House to take the same into their serious consideration*. Mr. Grey declined bringing forward any specific plan of reform, and moved "for the appointment of a committee to take the petition into consideration, and report such mode of remedy as shall appear to them proper." The Hon. Thomas Erskine seconded the motion, and, after two days' debate, the House divided, Ayes 41, Noes 282.—Majority 241.

* The petitioners, in concluding, thus forcibly recapitulated the objects of their prayer.

"That your honourable House will be pleased to take such measures, as to your wisdom may seem meet, to remove the evils arising from the unequal manner in which the different parts of the kingdom are admitted to participate in the representation.

"To correct the partial distribution of the elective franchise, which commits the choice of representatives to select bodies of men of such limited numbers as renders them an easy prey to the artful, or a ready purchase to the wealthy.

"To regulate the right of voting upon an uniform and equitable principle.

"And finally to shorten the duration of parliaments, and, by removing the causes of that confusion, litigation and expense, with which they are at this day conducted, to render frequent and new elections, what our ancestors at the Revolution asserted them to be, the means of a happy union and good agreement between the king and people*."

* Parl. Reg. 1793. XXXV. 375-522.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Friday, May 26th, 1797.

MR. GREY moved for "leave to bring in a bill to reform the representation of the people in the House of Commons*," and was seconded by the Hon. Thomas Erskine. On a division there appeared,

Ayes 93, Noes 258.—Majority 165.

* Mr. Grey proposed that, "Instead of ninety-two county members, as at present, there should be 113: instead of two for the county of York, for instance, two for each riding, and so in other counties, where the representation is not proportionate to the extent of soil and population: that each county or riding should be divided into grand divisions, each of which should return one representative, and that the right of election should be extended to copyholders, and to leaseholders for a certain number of years. That the other members should be returned by householders; that great towns should require a greater number of electors to one representative; that the country should be divided into districts, and no person permitted to vote for more than one member; that the poll should be taken through the whole kingdom in one day; and that the duration of parliament should be limited to three years*."

* Parl. Reg. 1797. Vol. II. 577-657.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Friday, April 25th, 1800.

MR. GREY moved, "that it be an instruction to the committee appointed to consider of his majesty's most gracious message respecting the union between Great Britain and Ireland, to take into their consideration the most effectual means of providing for, and securing the independence of parliament*." Mr. Tierney seconded the motion, which was rejected on a division,

Ayes 34, Noes 176.—Majority 142.

* After objecting to the increased influence of the crown which might arise from the introduction of 100 Irish members, in the present state of the representation, Mr. Grey said, "Although I do not agree that it is necessary for those, who disapprove of any specific plan, to propose a substitute, I am ready to state what I consider calculated to remove some part of the inconveniencies which we apprehend. I would suggest that forty of the most decayed boroughs should be struck off, which would leave a vacancy of eighty members. I should then propose that the ratio, on which Ireland is to have 100 representatives, should be preserved: and the proportion to the remainder 478 would give us 85 members for that country. The county elections would give 69 members, and 16 remain to be chosen by a popular election, by the principal towns. By this motion it is only intended to keep parliament in its present state, to prevent it from becoming worse*."

* Parl. Reg. 1800. II. 347-377.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Thursday, June 15th, 1809

SIR FRANCIS BURDETT moved, "That this House will, early in the next session of parliament, take into consideration the necessity of a reform in the representation*." Mr. Madocks seconded the motion, and the House divided,

Ayes 15, Noes 74.—Majority 59.

* "My plan," said Sir Francis Burdett, "consists in a very few, and very simple regulations, and as the disease we labour under has been caused by the disunion of property and political right, which reason and the constitution say should never be separated, the remedy which I shall propose will consist in reuniting them again. For this purpose I shall propose,

"That the freeholders, householders, and others, subject to direct taxation, in support of the poor, the church, and the state, be required to elect members to serve in parliament.

"That each county be subdivided according to the taxed male population, and each subdivision required to elect one representative.

"That the votes be taken in each parish by the parish officers; and all elections finished in one and the same day.

"That the parish officers make the returns to the sheriff's court to be held for that purpose at stated periods; and

"That parliaments be brought back to a constitutional duration*."

* Cobbett's Parl. Deb. XIV. 1041-1071.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Monday, May 21st, 1810.

The HON. THOMAS BRAND moved, "That a committee be appointed to enquire into the state of the representation of the people in parliament, and of the most efficacious means of rendering it more complete, and to report the same with their observations thereupon to the House *." He was seconded by ,
and, on a division, there were,

Ayes 115, Noes 234.—Majority 119.

* Mr. Brand stated, "that he did not mean to touch the right of voting for county members, except by letting in copyholders, and assimilating the mode of voting in Scotland to the practice of this country; but that, whilst he left the right of voting so far untouched, he should propose to disfranchise the boroughs, in which the members were returned upon the nomination of individuals, and, as the numbers of the House would be diminished in that proportion, to transfer the right of returning such members to populous towns, and to apply any surplus to the more populous counties; that he would recommend the duration of parliament to be made triennial, together with a concurrent arrangement for collecting the votes by districts and parishes. And that, with a view to the independence of parliament, persons holding offices without responsibility should not be suffered to have seats in that House *."

* Cobbett's Parl. Deb. XVII. 123-164.

HOUSE OF COMMONS.

Friday, May 8th, 1812.

The HON. THOMAS BRAND moved, "for leave to bring in a bill to repeal the act 31 George II. c. 14. and to entitle copyholders to vote for knights of the shire*." The Marquis of Tavistock seconded the motion, and the House divided,

Ayes 88, Noes 215.—Majority 127.

* Mr. Brand said, "he would also propose to get rid of nomination, and to throw the representation of the close boroughs into an enlarged representation of the more populous counties. One part, therefore, of the plan which he had in view, was to bring in a bill for the abolition of those boroughs, and the consequent appropriation of a more extensive suffrage to the more populous counties, from whence an equalization of members to the different parts of the empire would arise. He did not wish to make any innovation, but rather to restore to the constitution what the great innovator Time had taken from it*."

* Votes of the House of Commons, 1812, No. 80.—Morning Chronicle, May 9, 1812.—Cobbett's Parl. Deb. XXII.

THE END.

ve to
and
e*."
and

omi-
into
One
g in
ap-
oun-
parts
ova-
nno-

oni-